

# COPING STRATEGIES AMONG POLICE OFFICERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH CIVILIANS

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## 1. Background & Aim

Law enforcement has been recognized as one of the most stressful occupations worldwide, and the use of maladaptive coping strategies in police work has been found to lead to chronic and long-term stress, increased rates of heart disease, stomach disorders, divorce, alcohol/drug abuse, suicide, job burnout and leaving the profession (Grubb et al., 2015; Webster, 2014). Thus, policing demands strategies to cope with stress during professional tasks. Coping is defined as an individual's cognitive and behavioral actions to manage internal or external stressors or problems which exceed their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Moreover, coping styles are individual specific ways to deal with stressful situations (Aldwin, 2000; Jang et al., 2007; Vulic-Prtoric et al., 2009). Research suggests that critical incidents and other work-related stressors can lead police officers to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, and to suffer negative outcomes, such as mental or physical diseases and posttraumatic stress disorder (Ménard & Arter, 2014). This study aims to identify coping strategies used by police officers from Public Security Police (PSP – Polícia de Segurança Pública) working on Municipal Police of Porto or on other police departments, and to compare them with a group of civilians outside of these police forces.

## 2. Methods

**Participants:** The sample consisted of 55 police officers from PSP and 55 workers from services or education areas, paired according gender, age and graduation degree. Ages ranged from 23 to 59 years (M=43.10 SD= 9.38), 13% of the participants were female and 43% high graduated.

**Instruments:** Data were collected using the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS 21, from Endler & Parker, 1990; ongoing version of Pereira & Queirós), a questionnaire with 21 items (5 points Likert scale, ranging from 1 - not at all to 5 - very much) assessing how often participants engage in various activities described when they encounter a difficult, stressful, or upsetting situation. According the questionnaire, coping strategies are organized in three independent main coping styles: emotion oriented, task oriented, and avoidance.

**Procedure:** The questionnaire was self-reported and anonymously fulfilled after participants' agreement using snowball method and contacting participants during other research projects ongoing at the faculty.

**Data analysis:** IBM-SPSS-21 was used to perform descriptive, correlation (*R Pearson*) and comparative t-test independent analysis.

## 3. Results

Results showed (Table 1) the predominance of task orientated strategies (Figure 1), followed by emotion orientated and avoidance. Difference between groups (Figure 2) were found for task and emotion orientated strategies, with police officers presenting statistically significant lower values than civilians. No significant correlations between coping strategies and age were found (Table 2), and gender differences only appear on civilians group, with women using more emotion orientated strategies (Figure 3).

## 4. Conclusions

Data suggests that during stressful situations the sample preferred action than emotion reactions, although civilian women valorize emotion. Lower values presented by police officers suggest impulsivity control during action, but lower emotion use suggests emotional suppression, which can facilitate long-term trauma, burnout or other pathologies (Próchniak, 2014; Sundaram & Kumaran, 2012). Although the majority of police officers use adaptive coping strategies to deal with stressors, 9% use maladaptive one, avoidance. Existing research finds that officers who receive training to improve their coping skills, including emotion-regulation skills, had better outcomes than their untrained counterparts, and researchers begun to develop and explore officer resiliency programs designed to teach officers better coping skills (Anshel & Brintaupt, 2014; Balmer et al., 2014; Menard & Arter, 2014). Thus, departments should invest to provide police officers health education information and reduced cost services (e.g., gym memberships, counseling, coping skills training) to help them learn and use adaptive coping strategies to deal with stress.

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Table 1. Coping's mean comparison according group and sex

Variables (1-5 scale)	Task	Emotion	Avoidance
All sample – mean (SD)	3,73 (0,71)	2,50 (0,90)	2,22 (0,87)
Police officers	3,60	2,25	2,23
Civilians	3,91	2,74	2,22
t (p)	-2,373 (.019)*	-2,957 (.045)*	0,025 (.980)
Police officers - male	3,57	2,21	2,20
Police officers - female	3,90	3,00	2,22
t (p)	-0,711 (.480)	-1,667 (.101)	-0,048 (.962)
Civilians - male	3,94	2,57	2,18
Civilians - female	3,78	3,44	2,41
t (p)	0,779 (.439)	-5,429 (.000)*	-0,811 (.421)

\*p<.050

Figure 1. Means of coping strategies

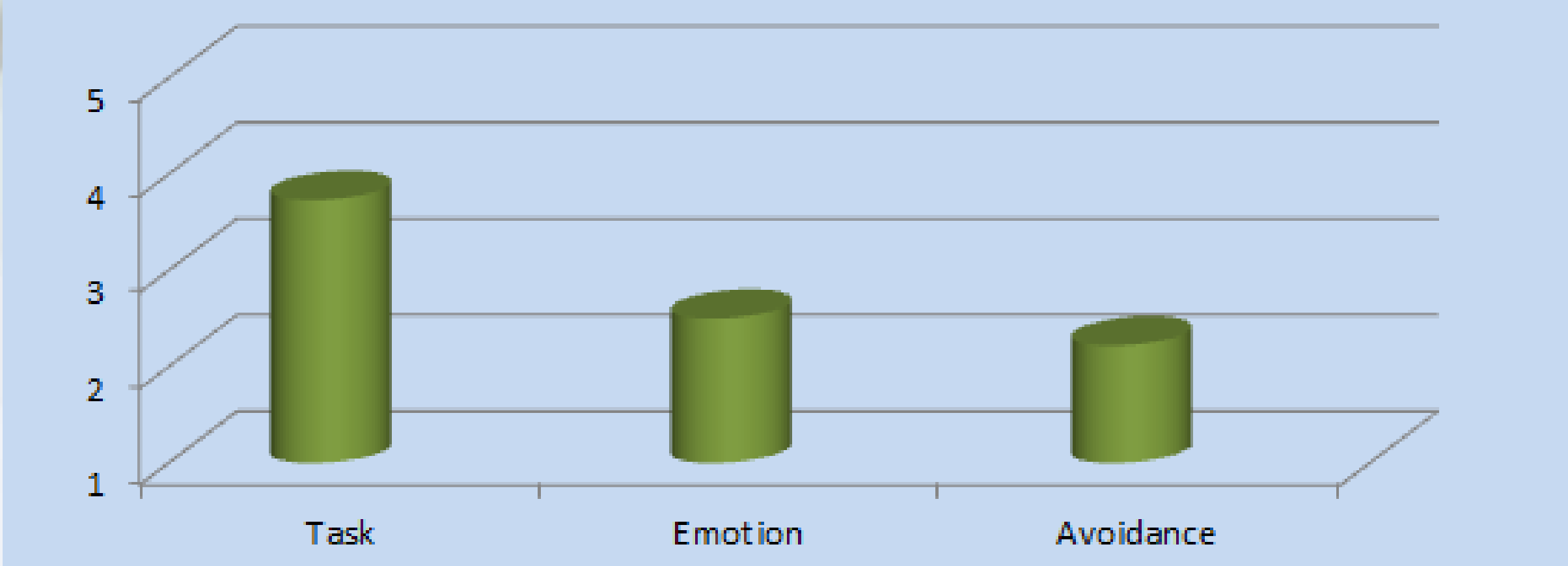


Figure 2. Coping strategies 'means' comparison between police officers and civilians

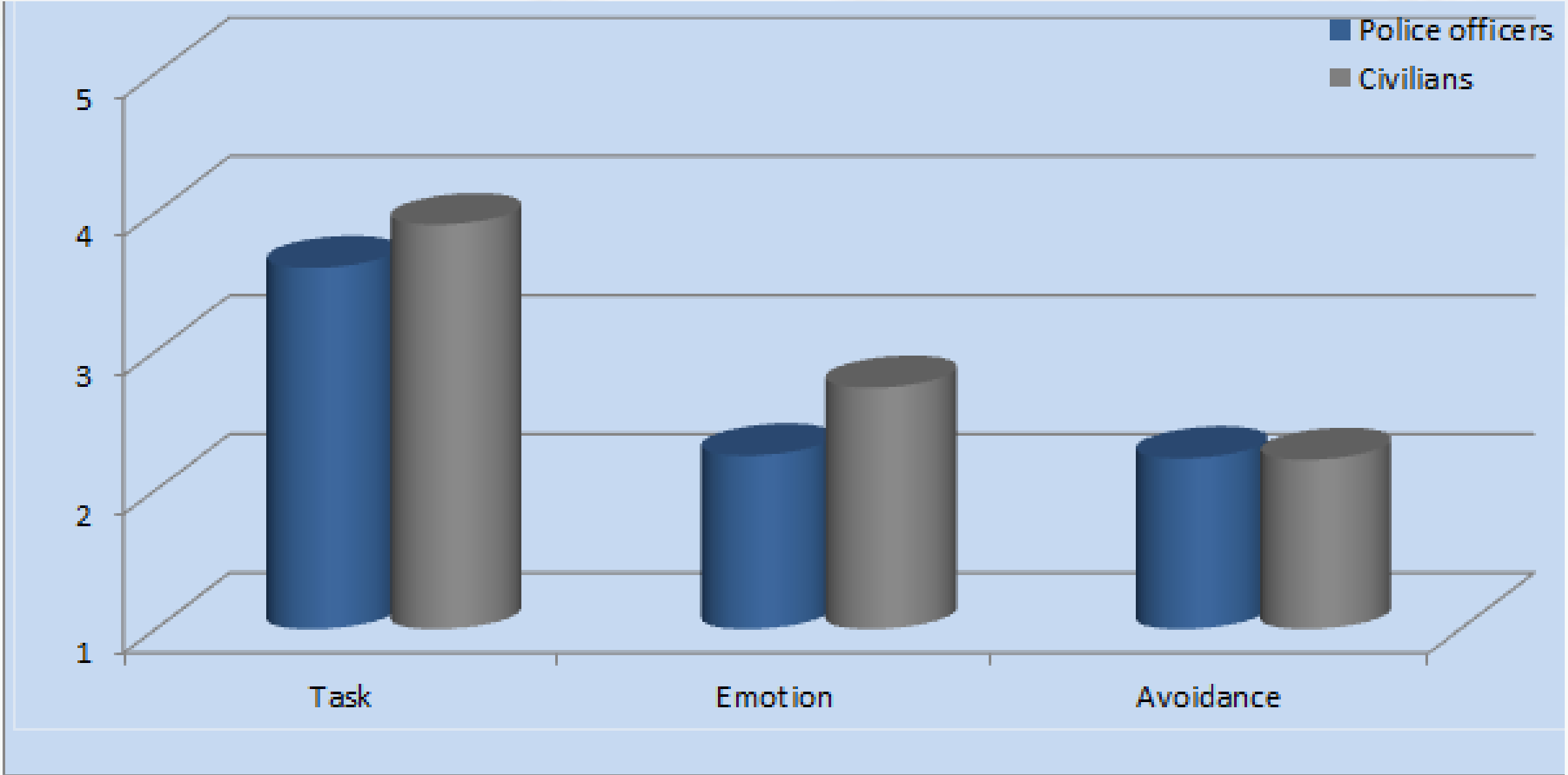


Table 2. Correlations between age and coping dimensions according each group

Coping dimensions	Group	Age	Task	Emotion
Task	Police officers	-,217		
	Civilians	-,117		
Emotion	Police officers	,062	-,165	
	Civilians	-,003	,065	
Avoidance	Police officers	,002	,017	,266
	Civilians	-,241	,066	,278*

\*p<.050

Figure 3 . Coping strategies 'means' comparison according groups and gender

